DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 263 781 FL 015 403

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TITLE Tutoring without a Net.
PUB DATE 84
NOTE 5p.; In: Language Key to Learning. Selected Papers from the Annual State Convention of the Illinois Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages/Bilingual Education (12th, 1984). Volume V. (FL 015 399).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *English (Second Language); Second Language Instruction; *Teacher Student Relationship; Teaching Methods; *Tutoring; *Writing Exercises; *Writing Instruction

ABSTRACT

Four techniques are suggested for tutoring students of English as a second language in writing: taking a "writing history" of the student's experiences, failures, and successes at writing by asking open-ended questions in a non-judgmental way during an informal interview; brainstorming about a given writing topic, with the tutor taking close notes of the student's comments and making no evaluation; timed writing assignments, five to ten minutes long, on broad topics from which the student makes a selection; and oral proofreading, in which a student reads a paper, an unmarked paper or a timed writing composition, paying attention to grammatical and surface error. The exercises can be used for diagnosis, illustration, or practice, but all have the common objective of developing a solid tutor-student relationship. Moreover, with effective demonstration and encouragement, the students begin to adopt and internalize the techniques for themselves. (MSE)

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Tutoring Without a Net

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Introduction

In a large, strictly organized tutoring program, many diagnostic tools are used, and teachers provide tutors with detailed information on students' specific grammatical or writing problems, often with detailed instructions on how to correct them (exercises, relevant chapters of textbooks, etc.). This makes the tutor's job, if not easy, at least structured and clearcut. However, not all tutoring programs are this sophisticated, and not all students fit so easily into a slot of prescribed exercises and canned handouts. A great deal of tutoring is done without a net--that is, with the tutor's instincts, techniques and common sense guiding the sessions rather than a structured, predetermined lesson plan. Our presentation hopes to make known to other TESOL teachers four techniques with which we have become familiar through our experience as writing tutors for both ESL and English-speaking students: writing histories, brainstorming, timed writing, and oral proofreading.

Writing History

Students often arrive at their first tutoring session embarassed, hostile, and anxious. A frustrated ESL student may proclaim, "In my language I write beautifully; I can't put my thoughts into English." A more advanced student's complaint may be an inability to find a topic, to understand what the teacher wants, to be interesting enough, or to sound intelligent enough. If the tutor is willing to listen to these tales of woe, the student will feel more comfortable about working with a tutor and will perhaps be able to focus more clearly on specific areas that s/he needs to work on.

This type of conversation can easily produce a writing history, a record of the student's past experiences, failures, and successes jotted down in the student's folder by the tutor as the student talks. In an intial session, that gives the student something to talk about that s/he knows very well, gives the tutor a chance to get to know the student a little better, and establishes a base for both to work from in future sessions. The tutor asks open-ended questons: "Could you tell me a little about the writing courses you took in your country in high school?" "What is it you dislike most about writing?" "Why?" It's important not to respond to the student's answers in a judgmental way, or to pop up with instant solutions to problems that the student has been plagued with for a long time. Empathic listening, responding with phrases like "I see that would be difficult," "That's a problem many people have," "English certainly is a confusing language, even to native speakers," coupled with quietly making notes of the student's comments, will be more likely to put the student at ease. Tell the

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student that some notes will be taken on his/her feelings and experiences about writing; many people are made uneasy by seeing their words being taken down, and the student should know that this is not just one more evaluation of his/her inadequacy. In future sessions, as the student makes progress, this initial record can be referred to as a measure of the strides the student has made. When a problem arises, the tutor can use the writing history as reassurance that the student has recognized this problem before and with work will be able to overcome it.

Brainstorming

Another helpful "without a net" activity, brainstorming, again involves the student talking and the tutor taking notes. This time, however, the student is answering leading questions the tutor has given him on a given writing topic. This technique rebuts the often-heard cry, "I have nothing to say," by proving to the student that orally he has a great deal to say. Then it is a little easier to show him that whatever he can say, he can also probably write. The tutor should write down what the student says in his own words as much as possible. As in taking a writing history, there should be no criticism or evaluation; write it down no matter how it sounds, or how much sense it makes. It's much easier to scratch things out on a list without being threatened than it is to hear one's spoken words attacked. After a list of ideas is made, the student looks it over and with the tutor's guidance eliminates what is redundant or awkward. This can be a good beginning in getting a student to begin to write a composition on his own at home, using the results of the brainstorming session, and gives him some insight into the process of writing.

This type of technique may give a tutor writer's cramp, and may seem to turn the tutor into a glorified stenographer, but these objections are overcome by the value of having the student think out loud for him/herself in an atmosphere of support and guidance.

Timed Writing

Timed writing is an easy and effective way to start tutoring sessions, or to encourage the unprepared student to write. This exercise of writing for five to ten minutes on a given topic by tutor and student was originally conceived as a warm up fluency exercise, but we have expanded its use to diagnosis and illustration.

Teacher preparation for timed writing is minimal and begins with making about twenty-five timed writing cards. On an index card, write the title of a very broad topic. The topics should be familiar to students and easy to develop by description, narrative, or exposition. Students should also be able to subdivide the topic. Examples of successful topics for us are Summer (or Winter) in Chicago, Vending Machines, and Exercise. It's a good idea to keep track of the success of topics and to eliminate any that prove difficult to develop quickly. Then place the cards together face down.

Introduce the task before presenting the pack of cards to the student. To calm students who are nervous about writing spontaneously,

quickly, and/or under the eye of authority, you might want to say, "Let's both try some writing for just five minutes. Pick a card, any card." The game-like rules provide a comforting light structure, some student control, and the assurance that the tutor is busy, not watching for errors.

When time is up, ask the student to stop, and in the same game-like fashion, exchange papers. Instead of waiting for evaluation, the student reads a model produced under the same circumstances. For students who rarely read English outside of textbooks, this provides a brief, nonthreatening sample of exposition. Thus, I usually try (not too hard) to produce writing personally based, yet with a direct thesis statement and, of course, some scratching out. Often this reading provokes questions and comments on topics ranging from vocabulary to organization patterns, misspellings, and grammatical errors. These comments provide the tutor with additional insight into the student's knowledge of writing, and, of course, are an excellent transition into examination of the student's writing.

Meanwhile, since you have already glanced over the student's paper, you can begin mutual examination with compliments. Even if you are as vague as "I'm glad I had a chance to see your good ideas about this," you lay a positive foundation for the tutoring relationship. The first glance also allows you to develop a tentative diagnosis which oral proofreading by the student will further solidify. Then begin oral proofreading, and explore questions and comments of the student.

With the diagnosis gained from the timed writing, you can now start working with the student on particular problems. If they are sentence-level, you can use samples from the timed writing in your discussion. If the discussion focuses on organization or development, use the sample as a nucleus for further brainstorming or expansion. Thus, along with brainstorming, timed writing can become a technique for exploration of topics used by the student alone.

Oral Proofreading

In oral proofreading, a student reads a paper aloud after being requested to pay attention to grammatical and surface error. To use this as a diagnostic and training technique, the student should use a completely unmarked paper. If one is unavailable, use a timed writing. As a last resort, a text proofreading exercise can be used. The diagnosis provided by oral proofreading is more specific than that allowed by examination of the product alone, for the tutor has the opportunity to observe the degree of the student's ignorance of the error. This can range from simple carelessness, caught easily at the second look, to lack of knowledge of a grammatical rule. Simultaneously, the training develops specific ways for the student to accomplish the vague and, therefore, neglected task of "looking over the paper before handing it in."

The success of oral proofreading is based upon two assumptions: first, that most students speak better than they write, and, second, that after the writing task is completed, it is time to get the monitor moving in the student's favor. Before beginning, the student should be made aware of the objectives of the task, and how these objectives can be met. Reading aloud enforces the slower, word-by-word reading

required of proofreading. Paying attention to reading only what is written provokes additional concentration. Tell the student there will be no intervention during the reading, but that the student may stop and raise questions.

With these instructions, the student reads the paper aloud. Many students catch errors as they read, and the improvement can be quite dramatic. If this is the case, the demonstration is often enough to encourage the student to use the occasion to raise questions or talk about fears about committing error. Here you can reassure the student when writing is correct and/or meaningful. It can be comforting to a student to know that s/he can find errors by proofreading rather than trying to avoid error too early in the writing process.

Some students read the paper as written and do not notice errors. After the first reading is finished, ask the student to look at particular sentences again, perhaps with attention to a specific error. The degree to which this technique is successful may help determine the amount of practice under more controlled circumstances. After this practice, oral proofreading becomes a review and reinforcement technique.

Another large group of students read correctly, overlooking written errors. You can train these students through requests for repetition, echoing, pointing, or circling exercises. The students then become more aware of their written words and correct accordingly. If this is successful, oral proofreading can save the tutor and student from involved explanation of grammar and hours of useless controlled exercises.

If the practice alone does not diminish errors, more specific techniques can be used. For run-on sentences, ask students to check for a period when their voices drop and stop, thus relying on their acquisition of sentence intonation patterns. For the opposite problem, fragments, ask students to read the last sentence first and proceed backwards. The slowness of reading aloud, combined with the removal of context, often makes the student aware of the fragment's "incompleteness." For specific errors, such as omitted -s markers, ask students to do their own echoing and pointing, to emphasize proofreading's mechanical nature and isolate problem areas from larger context. Through this training, the tutor can help students free themselves from total dependence on another's corrections of writing problems to recognition and control on their own.

Conclusion

All of the four techniques described here have one obvious common intention, to change a wasted session to one of foundation for the tutoring relationship. Another, more important one, is to provide a basis for the end of that relationship by helping students develop their own control and awareness of their writing. Each technique demands the student's active participation in tutoring, so the student begins to assume responsibility. And with effective demonstration and encouragement, students begin to adopt and internalize the techniques for themselves. When a student can say, as one once did to me at a session's end, that all I did was ask questions, and that he could do that for himself, you know your job is almost done.